THE FORMAL ART OF ANCIENT EGYPT

Alabaster statuette, Pepy I
Old Kingdom, Dynasty VI

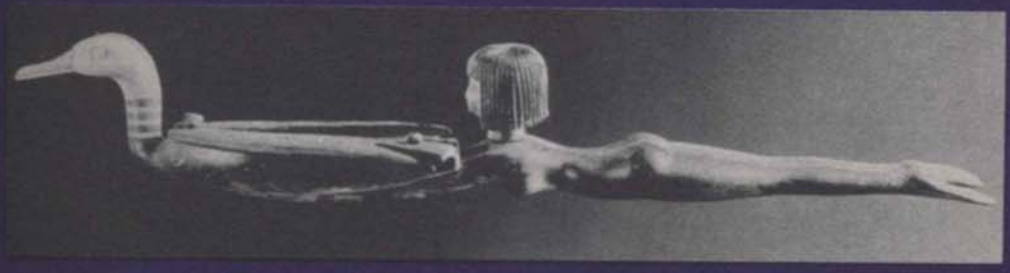
After 200 years of militant rivalry, the kingdoms of Upper and Lower Egypt were unified in 3100 B.C. The new political and social stability—marking the transition from ancient to modern times—was reflected in Egyptian art, particularly of the classical period, or Old Kingdom, spanning Dynasties III-IV (2686-2181 B.C.). Chaotic, illegible predynastic art was replaced by pictorial clarity and order; easily understood by the masses, art became an important propaganda tool for glorification of the king and gods and for social stability.

The Egyptians "needed an art to match their environment, as fixed as the positions of the stars . . . as unvarying as the sunshine," as reliable as the cyclic Nile floods, says Prof. Kazimierz Michalowski in *Art of Ancient Egypt*. (Harry N. Abrams) Emanating from the capital at Memphis and circulated through the provinces, a canon of rules developed that unified the style and quality of Egyptian

art for 3,000 years. Squared grids drawn on papyrus, stone or plaster standardized figure proportions for painting, sculpture and relief; standing figures consistently measured 18 squares from head to toe, with two rows from forehead to neck, ten from neck to knee and six from knee to foot. Rules also governed matters of propriety and dual perspective. Heads were seen in profile—right preferred to left, eyes and shoulders frontal, figures customarily turned to the right. The canon was most stringently applied to the social élite; royalty was represented in formal poses without physical defect. Priests and high officials, second in rank, had formal poses but unidealized bodies. Workers could be portrayed more intimately if their occupations were made clear.

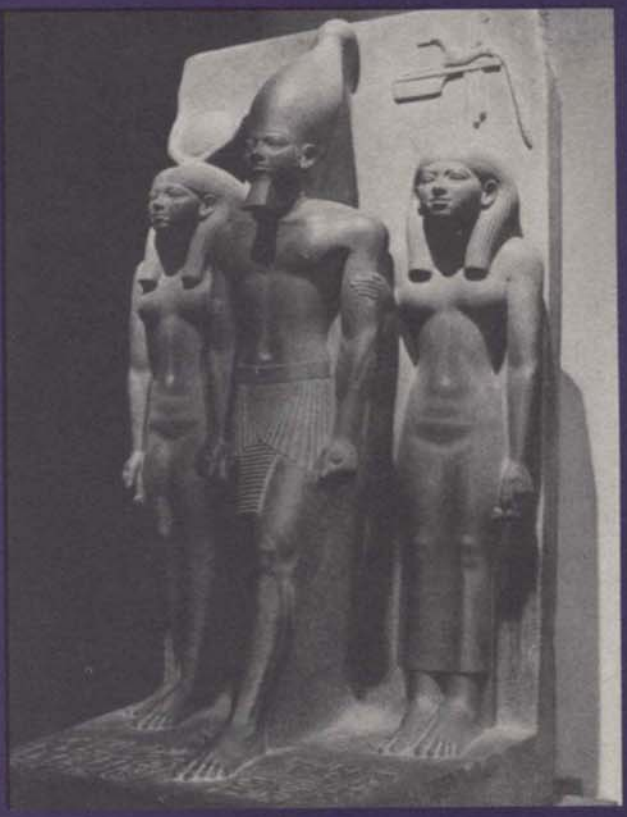
Art reflected the rigid social order, which subordinated earthly life to the permanent afterlife. "Both religion and art perpetuated the conviction that earthly conditions are unchangeable and that one must bear them humbly," says Professor Michalowski, who is Director of the Institute of Mediterranean Archeology at Warsaw University and Vice-Director of the Polish National Museum. "No other art in history has been more closely connected to the existing social and religious aspects of a culture."

After Dynasty VI, internal revolution and foreign invasion precipitated cycles of cultural decline and revival. Art reached its peak during the Middle Kingdom (Dynasties XI-XII) and the prosperous New Kingdom (Dynasties XVII-XX) from 1650 to 1085 B.C. During the latter, a prolific "golden age" for all the art forms, the canon was relaxed and figures became more slender, graceful and flexibly posed. Individualized expressions extended even to Pharoah Amenhotep II, who was represented with such physical imperfections as an egg-shaped head, paunch and massive jaw. **—ES**

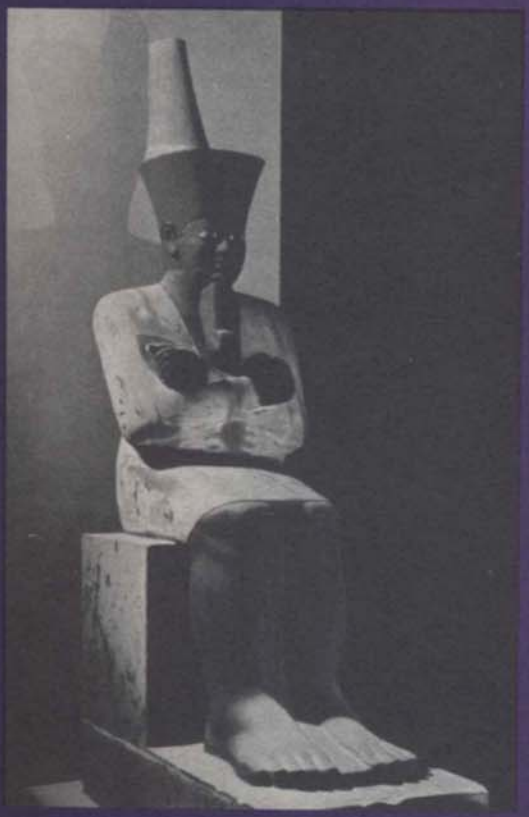


Wooden cosmetic spoon with girl swimmer, Dyn. XVIII

Slate carving (right) of King Mycerinus flanked by the goddess Hathor and "The Dog:" Giza, Dyn. IV



Early representation of a goddess (below) from Predynastic Amratian Period

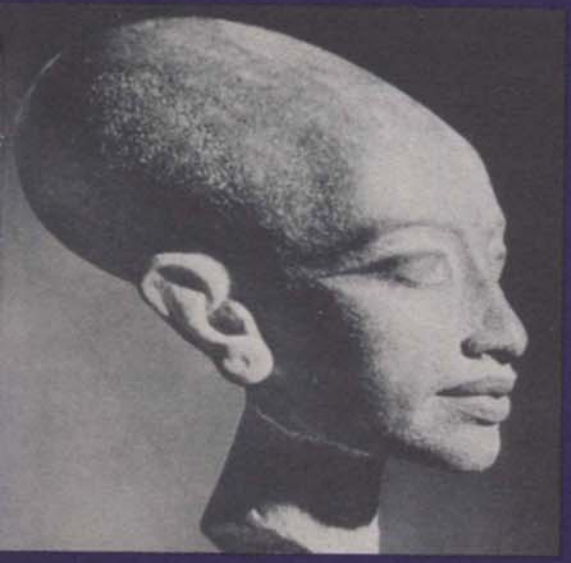


Painted sandstone carving (left) of Mentuhotep I; Theban school, Middle Kingdom (Dyn. XI)

Dog-faced god (above) limestone carving, Middle Kingdom

New Kingdom flexibility and grace evident in two wooden statues of workers, Dyn. XVIII

New Kingdom wall painting: Deceased, drinking water of Amentit in shade of Doum Palm



Deformed head of XVIII Dynasty Princess, with New Kingdom freedom to show physical imperfections

Portrait of a young woman, encaustic on wood, from Roman Period, The Louvre

Alabaster lamp from Tut-ankh-amon's tomb; New Kingdom, Dyn. XVIII